

NEBRASKA'S CAPITOL CITY IS GREEN ... AND STERLING

Lincoln, Nebraska and City Forester Steve Schwab

Photos by Steve Schwab



Students, Mayor Coleen Seng, Parks & Recreation Director Lynn Johnson, Lincoln forestry board members, and others gather in Pentzer Park on Arbor Day 2005. Lincoln is home to the National Arbor Day Foundation.



How did you get into urban forestry, and are you a native Nebraskan?

SS: I was born and raised in St. Paul, Minnesota. I went to the University of Minnesota and graduated in 1978 with a BS in forest resource management, then went to work for the South Dakota Division of Forestry in Sioux Falls as a district forester. One of my job duties was to provide technical community forestry assistance to communities in the Sioux Falls district, and this is how I became involved with and interested in urban forestry.

From 1984 to 1989, I was the urban forester for the Salt Lake City Parks & Recreation Department. During that time I worked closely with the Salt Lake City Forestry Board and the U.S. Forest Service in developing an urban forestry program for Salt Lake City. Since 1989, I've worked for the Lincoln Parks and Recreation Department as the city forester for Lincoln, Nebraska.

What would visiting MAs notice right away about Lincoln's urban forest?

SS: Visiting MAs have told me that they are impressed with the number of trees that Lincoln has—currently, over 112,000 on city property. Also, visitors comment on the diversity of tree species and the extent of street tree and landscaping plantings in the Downtown Business Improvement Districts. And when folks

approach downtown Lincoln, they appreciate the corridor of greenspace, parks, trees, and water adjacent to the Interstate—something not many cities have.

What three or four sites would you take MAs to?

SS: We'd go to the top of the 400-foot tower of the State Capitol building, where a panoramic view of Lincoln's entire urban forest can be seen and truly appreciated. We'd go to the crown jewel of Lincoln's 114 city parks: our 1100-acre Pioneers Park and Nature Center. In 1932, over 43,000 trees were planted in this park. Today, stands of mature pines and hardwood trees are located throughout, and an ongoing reforestation effort continues due to an endowment created in the 1980s by the Friends of Pioneers Park. Finally, we'd go to Lincoln's downtown areas, where streetscape planting beds have been in use since the late 1980s to provide more growing space and less pavement area for the benefit and longevity of our street trees and other plants.

About what area might you ask MAs for advice?

SS: I'd ask three questions: Have they used tree growth regulators to manage the growth of street trees in downtown areas and beneath overhead utility lines? Second, have they developed a cost-share street tree removal/replacement policy and program with their local utility company to address having the right tree in



Lincoln was a prairie town founded in 1867, with just a smattering of native trees existing along Salt Creek.

As Lincoln grew, so did the tree planting efforts of its citizens, who needed shade in the hot Nebraska summers and windbreaks for long, cold winters.



Lincoln mall. Today, Lincoln's urban forest has an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 public and private trees.

the right location when planting street trees beneath overhead utility lines on the public rights-of-way? Lastly, how they are addressing the issue of available tree nursery stock not being diverse enough and the growing problem of the root collar/flare being buried well below the top of the rootball in tree nursery stock?

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Seniors planting trees in one of Lincoln's 114 city parks

What unique challenges do you face in Lincoln?

SS: Since 1986, Lincoln has required developers of new subdivisions to install street trees as part of their development. This has added at least 10,000 additional street trees during that time. Pruning these trees every five years to develop proper branch structure is a goal, but maintaining our older trees on our 11-year trim cycle is also important. Allocating resources between the two different trim cycles is a constant management challenge.

Pine wilt disease has started to take its toll on both Scotch and Austrian pines in the Midwest, with Lincoln being no exception. We have numerous city parks that have these tree species, and there is no cure yet for this disease. Some of the parks could suffer substantial tree losses if this disease is not controlled.



Linden does well in Lincoln because of its tolerance of the city's alkaline soils and hot and dry summers. It accounts for about 10% of Lincoln's public trees. Pictured: *Tilia cordata* 'Greenspire'

Lincoln, Nebraska Quick Facts

Human Population:	236,146 (74th most populated U.S. city)
Street Tree Population:	62,559
Park Tree Population:	49,693
Most Common	
Street Trees:	maple, ash, hackberry, locust, oak, linden, pear, crabapple
Number of UF Staff:	18 including City Forester, Forestry Operations Supervisor, 5 Arborist II-Crew Foreman; 11 Arborist I
UF Budget:	\$1.2 million

Finding a greater diversity of tree species suitable for Lincoln's hot and drought-like conditions is another challenge. Lincoln has been in a drought for the past five years, with hotter- and dryer-than-normal summers.

What computer or applied technologies has Lincoln's city forest benefited from in the last five years?

SS: We contracted out a trial inventory, using handheld computers, of 5,000 street trees. The results helped us make the decision that such an inventory would be too expensive and that using trained volunteers would perhaps be a better approach for us.

We've used a transplanting hydrogel and mycorrhizal inoculant when planting street trees and have seen a 90% or better survival rate for such plantings.

How do you find/evaluate the best street tree species for Lincoln?

SS: Basically we find them through trial and error, after discussions with other MAs and with tree growers. For greater diversity, we've been planting more of the new hybrid elms ('Accolade', 'Frontier', 'Valley Forge', 'Pioneer'), maples like *Acer x freemanii* 'Marmo' and *Acer miyabei* 'State Street', and American hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*).

What are your goals for Lincoln's Community Forestry Program?

SS: To sustain its Tree City USA award status: Lincoln was named Tree City USA 29 years ago, has received the Tree City Growth Award for 15 consecutive years, and was named a Sterling Tree City USA in 2000. These awards are especially meaningful in light of the fact that the National Arbor Day Foundation has its headquarters in Lincoln. My goal is to plant 12,000 street trees where gaps now exist in Lincoln's streetscape in the next ten years.

Lincoln's Commitment to its City Trees

In 2006, the City of Lincoln will attempt to implement, for the first time, a citywide Street Tree Improvement District to generate capital improvement funds for planting and maintaining street trees on the City rights-of-way. Both Nebraska State law and Lincoln's city charter allow for the creation of such a District and the assessment if approved by the City Council. Creation of such a citywide district will provide \$180,000 for the next six years, in addition to the current \$1.2 million annual forestry budget.

Each assessable parcel or lot in the City of Lincoln will be annually assessed between \$2.15 and \$2.50 to generate this \$180,000. The extra funds will enable the City to plant the nearly 12,000 empty street tree planting spaces that currently exist in Lincoln's public rights-of-way. The assessment is a fair and equitable way for Lincolnhites to pay for maintaining and improving the green component of our public infrastructure, which provides numerous environmental, economic, and social benefits citywide.

We need to better educate our elected officials, decision-makers, and citizens about trees being our green infrastructure and the importance of maintaining it just as we do gray infrastructure.

I'd like to see dedicated funding for planting, maintenance, and preservation of Lincoln's community forest. Along those lines, the Nebraska legislature revised a state statute in 2005, whereby Lincoln can now create and establish a tree assessment to supplement existing funding for trees on city property (see sidebar).

Would you encourage people to get into this field?

SS: Most definitely. Urban and community forestry will only become more important in the future as more people move to our towns and cities. Sustaining the quality of life in these urban areas will be essential, and our urban forests will be a major factor. Urban forestry is still a relatively new concept to many people, and it has its challenges. But there is never a dull moment, and each day is different. 🌿

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